

The Land of the High Uintahs

Olive W. Burt

THE Uintah Basin in Utah, with its surrounding country, is a magnificent, unspoiled area, parts of which remain almost as they were when the Mormon pioneers came into the Great Basin. Or you can go back further, carried by the remnants of old forts, inscriptions scrawled upon sheer canyon walls, names of mountains and rivers, to the wild, free days of the Mountain Men, or on back to the days of ancient Indian tribes whose mark is faint but unmistakable—or even go back to the day of the dinosaur.

Truly, the flavor of age is nowhere else so pervasive and compelling as it is in the northeastern part of the State.

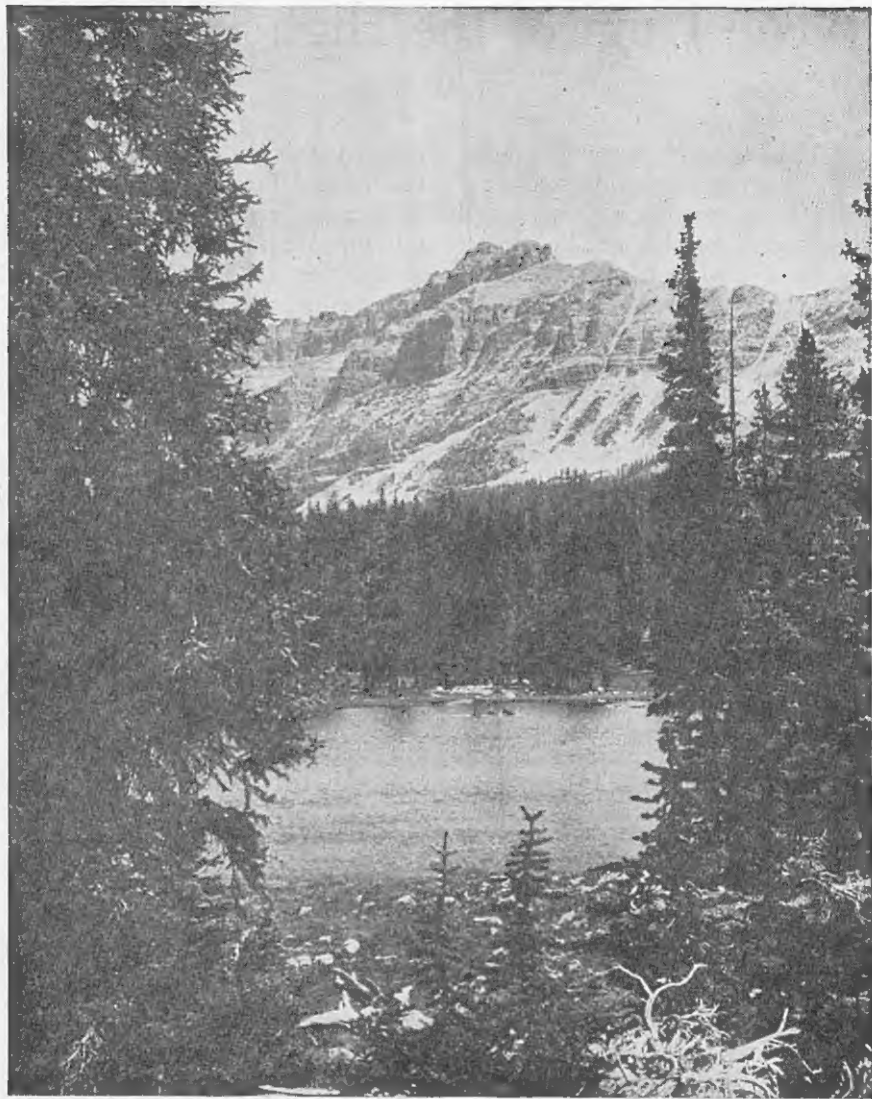
The Uintah Basin is bounded on the north by the Uintah Mountains, one of the few important east-west mountain ranges in the country. It is a beautiful range, with the highest peaks in the State rising majestically into the unsullied sky. They look peaceful, as if nothing could disturb them, but they have known disaster. They have felt the great heaving upthrust that tilted them high above their old resting place; they have felt the clawing fingers of glaciers, scraping ugly gashes across their face and breast. But they have waited quietly, until the scars were healed with pine and spruce, with flower-enameled grass, and shrubs sweet with wild fruit.

Above the 125-mile-long chain of lesser slopes, rises King's Peak, highest point in the State; with Wilson,

Hayden, Marsh, and Leidy peaks and Mount Lovenia, all rising more than 12,000 feet. Below their snowy summits are hundreds of jewel-like, glacial lakes, fed by sparkling mountain streams, and teeming with trout and mackerel: Mirror, Granddaddy, Moon, Island, Pyramid, Green, to name only a few of the best known.

While an automobile road has been built into this alpine region as far as Mirror Lake, the area is really unspoiled and will remain so, as it has been set aside by the Federal Government as a permanent "primitive area." In the most frequented spots, such as Mirror Lake, the gateway to the Granddaddy region, Moon Lake, and Defas Park, accommodations for the less hardy are available—cabins, stores, lodging, guides, horses, and boats. But to get the real "feel" of the place, one has to pack in, sleep under the stars, eat campfire meals, in short, take the region for what it is—a throwback to days when what is recreation today was hard living.

AS is to be expected, the rivers, born of the melting snows in these peaks, are not insignificant streams: the Bear, Provo, and Weber, and the Duchesne that feeds the mighty Green, itself a tributary of the Colorado. These rivers, making their inevitable way to the sea, have carved channels as varied as the waters themselves, from the bustling, trout-filled Provo and Weber to the terrific Green, with its Red Canyon gorge and Hideout Canyon more



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MIRROR LAKE IN THE HIGH UINTAHS

than 1500 feet deep, channeled through the rock, and Ladore Canyon, in ages past the lush feeding ground of giant reptiles.

The heavily timbered slopes teem with game, and the marshes are alive with beaver, muskrat, and mink. It

was the abundance of game that made the region a bountiful hunting ground for the Utes who claimed the area, and for the Shoshones who strayed that way, as well as for Pridy Meeks and his son-in-law during the famine times in the tiny, new

Mormon settlements further west. But it was the endless reserve of rich, furbearing animals that brought the first white men to live in the region.

A few miles west of the Colorado-Utah border, on highway 40, is a marker honoring the "first white men in Utah," Fathers Escalante and Dominguez. Father Escalante has left a rather detailed record of his visit to this area, but it was an exploratory trip, resulting only in calling attention to the region.

The first white people actually to live in the area were the trappers and traders—that romantic, free-footed band of Mountain Men and those who followed in their wake to outfit and supply them. These men, who made a business of romance, left their imprint on this rich region, and the first year-long dwelling for white men within the territory that is now Utah was built by a trader.

EARLY in the 1800's, any gentleman with sartorial aspirations had to have a beaver hat or two. The Hudson's Bay Company, exercising a protected monopoly of the fur trade in the North, was waxing greedy with wealth, when the Americans along the Mississippi, particularly in commercial St. Louis, began to cast envious eyes upon the fur business.

General William H. Ashley and his associates turned their backs on the Missouri River to follow the Platte westward, crossed the Rockies, and came into the virgin land to the West. Many of these men are remembered in Utah place names, but here can be mentioned

only those that came into the Uintah region. Ashley "invented" a new system of collecting the peltries from his trappers and distributing supplies—a system called the rendezvous.

At a designated time each summer, all company and independent trappers and Indians with peltries to trade, would meet at a planned spot. To that place would come the heavily laden pack train of the company. There would be a week of high living, during which the peltries would be sold, and new supplies purchased. At the end of the week, the trappers would return to their streams and lakes, with nothing but their kit for the coming season, and the pack train would return to St. Louis, even more heavily laden (but with peltries) and with all the money it carried out to pay for the furs, returning with them as payment for goods.

The first of all rendezvous was held on Henry's Fork of the Green River, on one side or the other of the Utah-Wyoming boundary line, in the year 1825. In following years the rendezvous was set in other lush fur regions, but the trappers from the high Uintahs always made their way to the meeting place, loaded with rich peltries.

In 1831 Antoine Robidoux came into the Basin to establish Fort Uintah on the Duchesne river. With him, it is supposed, was one Denis Julien, who carved his name and the date in five different places on the walls of the canyons, to establish himself as the champion inscription writer of this period. This post was destroyed by Indians in 1844.

In 1837, Robidoux evidently built



Courtesy, Utah State Historical Society

RENDEZVOUS OF FUR TRADERS AND TRAPPERS

another post, near the place where the White and the Duchesne Rivers enter the Green from opposite sides. Charles Kelly, Utah historian, has found remnants of such a fort and inscriptions of 1837 of both Robidoux's and Julien's names.

After the destruction of Fort Uintah, the area was left pretty much to the Utes and the trappers who were too "set" in their way of life to change, though Captain John C. Fremont and his men made a couple of trips through the area, with varying reports as to what they found here. Once or twice companies of "Forty-Niners" or other transcontinental journeyers would venture down from the Oregon Trail and cross the Uintah Basin, but these excursions were generally not very happy ones and did little for the country.

In 1851, soon after Utah was made a territory, with a good deal larger

area than it covers today, the Uintah Basin was incorporated in Green River County (now in Wyoming). It remained so until 1862, when county boundaries were changed, and changed again and again, all into the present boundaries of Wasatch, Duchesne, and Uintah, with Daggett not established until 1917.

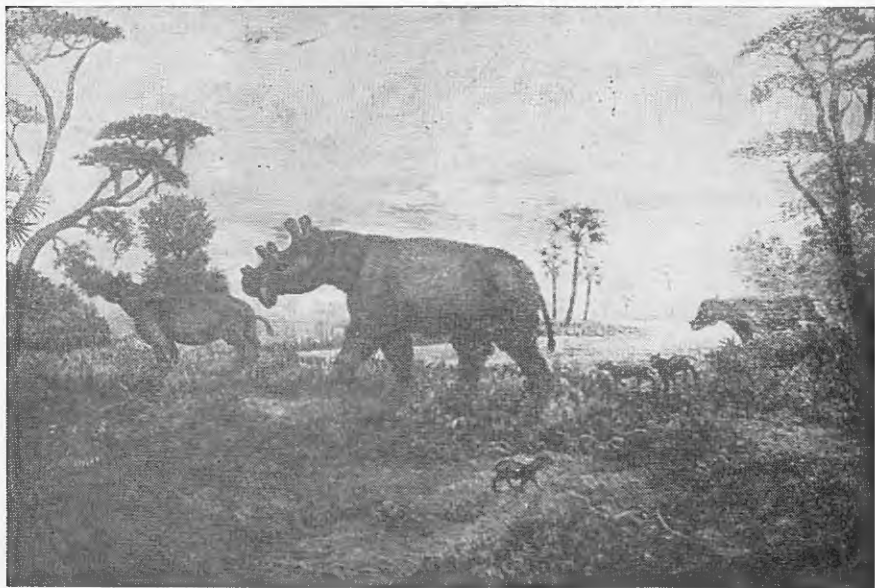
Brigham Young, as Governor of the new Territory, was also Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and he created the Uintah Agency. It had a rather sketchy existence, and on August 25, 1861, Daniel H. Wells announced a list of names of men who had been called to go into the Uintah Basin and establish a settlement there. Brigham Young, explaining his action, said, "Now I want a settlement there and I wish to pick the company. The Gentiles will take possession of that valley if we do not, and I do not wish them to have it."

THE advance group set out early in September, but soon returned, reporting that the land was good for nothing "but as a hunting ground for Indians and to hold the world together." The plan for a Mormon settlement there was held in abeyance for a time, but just then President Lincoln set apart all the fertile valley of the Basin as an Indian reservation, closed to white occupancy. President Young was quite upset to find his prediction of a few weeks earlier, fulfilled in this manner.

The Indians in the Basin were generally friendly to the whites, particularly to the Mormons, but further east, in Colorado, there were a number of uprisings and massacres, and so, in 1887, three companies of soldiers were ordered to leave Fort

Fred Steele in Wyoming and proceed down to the Uintah Basin, there to establish a fort for the purpose of keeping the Indians in hand. The soldiers came into the Basin from the north, and after a good deal of hardship due to their isolation from supplies, they finally built Fort Duchesne. Most of the buildings of the original fort have disappeared, but the community is still there, and is at present the headquarters of the Indian Agency.

Meantime, a few Mormon families were seeking homesteads on the less choice ground available to them. In 1876, the Robert H. Snyder family moved into Ashley Valley and for ten months Mrs. Snyder was the only white woman in the valley. In 1877, John Fairchild took his fam-



From a painting by Ramsey

PAINTER'S CONCEPTION OF PREHISTORIC ANIMALS
OF THE UINTAH BASIN

ily in. Children began to be born there, and to die—and the Ashley Valley was a part—though an isolated one—of the general development of the Territory.

In the winter of 1877-78 the first school was opened, and in 1879 new settlers poured in. The following winter was one of those cruel tests that seem to have followed the Latter-day Saint settlers into every new community, as if trying out their mettle before giving them peace to go ahead. This winter the only contact the little settlement had with the outside world was through mail carried on snowshoes by Peter Dillman.

Peter Dillman is a name that appears everywhere in the history of the Basin—postmaster, school teacher, interpreter, guide, friend, neighbor. Keeping Dillman company in his activities were the Hatches, George Albert Glines, the Snyders, and others whose names still ring through the Basin.

In 1878, Alma James Johnston built a cabin for his wife—not in the valley as everyone else had done, but up on the “bench” northwest of the settlement of Ashley. This was the first house on the present site of Vernal. In the seventy years since then, this community, the county seat of Uintah County, has grown slowly but steadily, with farming and livestock—and lately the oil fields to the south—to aid its prosperity.

Westward in the Basin other settlements—Roosevelt, Duchesne, and Myton, grew up along the highway that crossed the Basin from east to west. There is no railroad into the area, even yet.

TODAY, the Uintah Basin claims the proud title of “Bread Basket of the State.” It also boasts the only important veins of gilsonite in the United States.

No longer inarticulate and isolated, it makes its bid for a place in the sun through co-operation and willing effort. The white citizens and their Indian brothers have joined hands in a sort of mutual admiration society, which has its climax each year in the Uintah Basin Industrial Convention. At this three-day gathering, both races display their crops and stock, their handiwork and crafts, their skill on foot and on horseback, their traditions and culture.

All this has been written, and yet not a word has been said about the national monument up in the very northeast corner of the Basin—an area so unique that it draws the scholarly and the curious from all parts of the country. This is the Dinosaur Monument — the graveyard of the giant reptiles, where are found hundreds of skeletons of the prehistoric monsters that once roamed this high land.

It is only a seven-mile trip from Jensen, on U. S. highway 40, to this awe-inspiring quarry, where, in indisputable stone, the past becomes believable and real.

A trip into this magnificent area of lofty peaks and golden desert; of quiet farms and mountains split into chasms; of thrifty white men and ambitious Indians—a land of contradictions and contrasts—will reward you with the “feel” of the past and the pulse of the present.